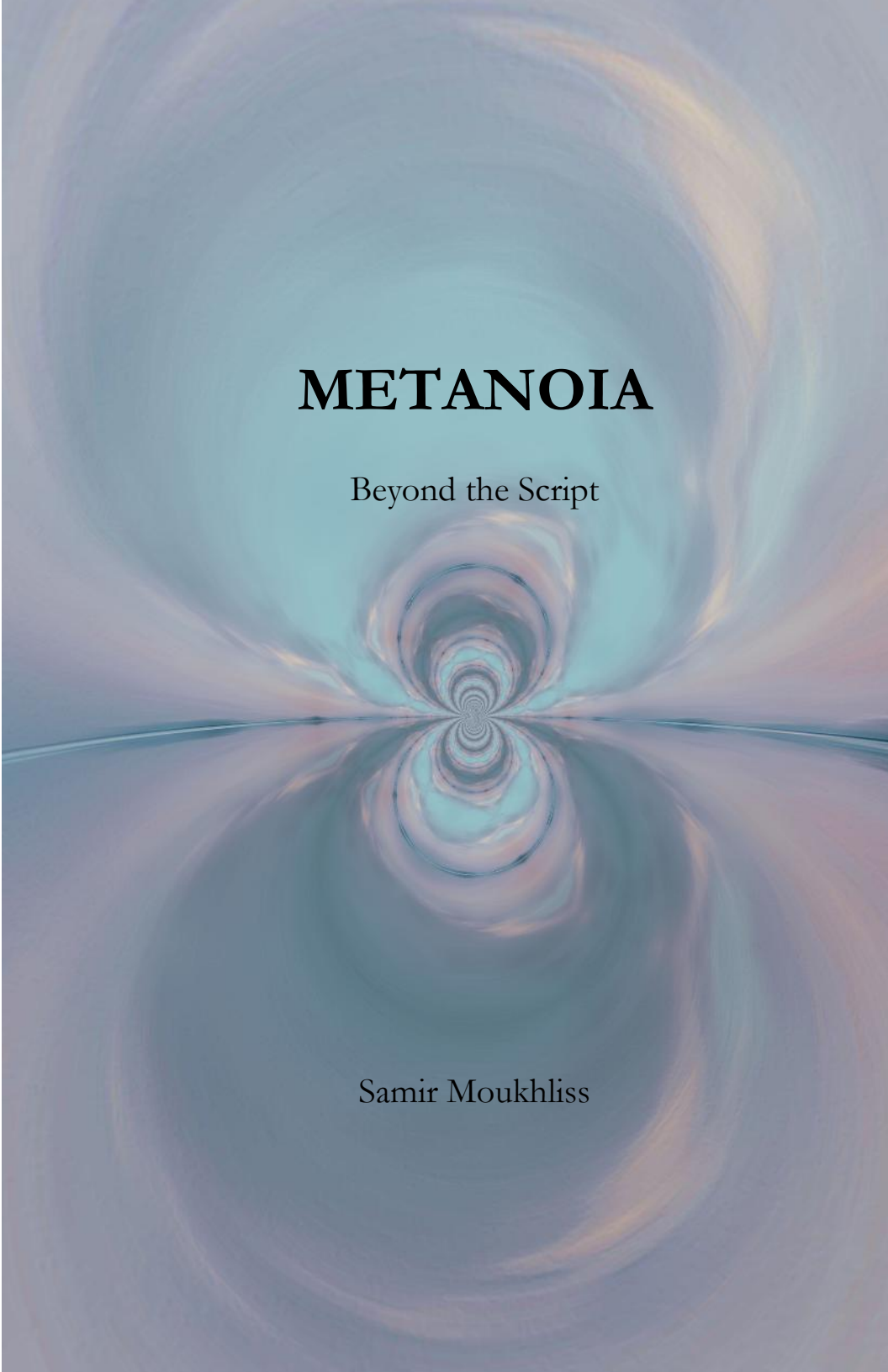

METANOIA

Beyond the Script

Samir Moukhliss

Arc I: The Passenger

Part 1: The Seamless Morning

The morning sun cuts through the blinds, dragging Zoe out of sleep.

It is the first day of her final year. She pushes the covers off, her feet hitting the hardwood floor, and heads downstairs.

Her hand glides along the polished wooden banister as she descends.

The stairs are solid oak, warm to the touch — a detail most people wouldn't notice, but Zoe has always liked the feel of it.

In the kitchen, her mother is scrolling through a tablet with one hand and holding a mug of coffee with the other.

Through the large glass door at the far end of the kitchen, Zoe can see the back garden: neatly trimmed hedges, a stone birdbath, and her father's rose bushes blooming late into September.

Her mother looks up and slides a crisp bill across the long dining table — easily four meters of dark mahogany from end to end.

"Morning, sweetie. Take this for dinner tonight," her mother says, eyes already back on the screen.

"I'll be late again. Transit project stress tests — I have to stay until the end."

Zoe pockets the money.

"Okay. Did Dad already leave?"

"An hour ago. Early rounds at the clinic."

"Do you want me to drop you off?" her mother asks, finally setting the tablet down. "It's your first day."

Zoe grabs a piece of toast. "No, I'm taking the bus. I told Maeve I'd meet her at the usual stop."

"Alright. Have a good day."

Zoe heads back upstairs to her room, grabs her backpack, and comes back down.

She opens the front door and steps out, walking down the long paved driveway.

She passes the manicured garden — her mother's pride — and heads toward the bus stop.

She knows exactly what Maeve is going to talk about the second she steps onto that bus. Jace.

Part 2: Cold Bath Road

The air at the Cold Bath Road bus stop was sharp and damp, typical for Harrogate in September.

Zoe stood with her hands buried in the pockets of her oversized sweater, staring at the wet pavement.

"I'm telling you, it's the exact same fit," Maeve announced, not as a greeting, but picking up a conversation only she was part of.

Maeve practically vibrated with energy, shoving her phone screen inches from Zoe's face.

On it, an influencer with heavily contoured cheekbones was posing in a matching olive-green lounge set.

"She hit a million followers yesterday," Maeve said, her thumbs flying across the screen as she liked the post.

"I ordered the knock-off version from Shein last night. If I pair it with those white trainers, it's identical."

"It looks nice," Zoe said. It was her default setting: polite, agreeable, and entirely non-committal.

The heavy double-decker bus groaned to a halt in front of them.

They climbed the stairs to the top deck, settling into a pair of seats near the back.

Zoe immediately leaned her head against the cool glass of the window, watching the large stone houses of the Duchy estate blur past.

As the bus turned onto Otley Road, the angle of the light shifted, and Zoe caught her own reflection in the glass: shoulder-length black hair falling across her face, tired eyes, the vague shape of her oversized sweater.

She barely recognized herself sometimes.

She hoped the drone of the engine would quiet things down, but Maeve was just getting started.

"Speaking of fits, what are you even wearing to the first Sixth Form mixer?"

Maeve asked, leaning over to inspect Zoe's sweater. Before Zoe could even attempt an answer, Maeve waved her own question away.

"Doesn't matter, we have time. But you cannot pull another disappearing act like you did at the summer party."

Zoe swallowed, her shoulders tensing. She kept her eyes glued to the window.

"Seriously, Zoe," Maeve continued, her voice dropping into a tone of theatrical disappointment.

"That abandoned farmhouse out by the moors was legendary. The techno, the pills floating around… it was insane. And right when it was peaking, you literally ran away. Like a terrified little chicken."

"It was getting late," Zoe mumbled to the glass. "I just… I didn't like the vibe."

"The vibe was fine," Maeve scoffed, nudging Zoe's arm hard enough to jostle her.

"You know who else was fine? Jace. He was literally looking right at you by the bonfire. I saw him. He was ready to come over, and you bolted. You completely missed your chance to have some actual fun. To actually live a little, instead of just… whatever this is."

Maeve gestured vaguely at Zoe's sweater.

The words stung. Shame rose in her chest.

A part of her wanted to snap back — wanted to say that being a woman didn't mean stumbling around a rotting farmhouse high on whatever someone handed you, or letting a guy like Jace use you for the night.

But the words died in her throat. Taking a stand required energy.

It required a spine she felt she didn't possess.

So she just nodded slightly. "I know. I'm sorry."

It was easier to just absorb the hit. It was always easier to let Maeve steer.

Appeased by Zoe's surrender, Maeve seamlessly shifted gears. "Whatever. Past is past. The new thing now is that café down on Montpellier Hill. The aesthetic is insane, and all the cool girls from the upper sixth have claimed the corner booths. We need to start going there after school. If we just show up enough, we'll fold right in."

Zoe didn't mention that she hated coffee, or that she had zero interest in forcing her way into the "cool girls" corner.

She just let Maeve's voice wash over her, a constant, exhausting current carrying her along. She was a passenger.

Not just on this bus, but in her entire life.

She couldn't decide what to wear, she couldn't decide how to defend herself, and she certainly couldn't decide who she wanted to be.

The brakes squealed as the bus pulled up to the sprawling, red-brick facade of Harrogate Grammar School.

"Come on," Maeve said, already standing up and slinging her bag over her shoulder.

"Year 13. Let's go pretend we know what we're doing."

Zoe exhaled shakily, pulled her backpack onto her shoulders, and obediently followed her friend off the bus and into the crushing weight of the school year.

Part 3: Limits and Variables

The fluorescent lights of the Year 13 maths classroom hummed — a low, irritating sound that blended perfectly with Mr. Harrison's monotone voice.

He was at the whiteboard, recapping the previous year's modules before diving into the new syllabus.

Zoe rested her chin on her hand, her eyes drifting away from the board.

To her left sat Chloe.

Chloe had openly declared on the first day of Year 12 that she was going to be an actress.

Looking at her now, casually twirling a pen while three different boys in her immediate radius vied for her attention, Zoe thought she might actually pull it off.

Chloe already knew how to play the princess, leading them all by the nose with a flick of her hair.

Zoe turned her head slightly to the right, where Sophie sat a few desks down.

Sophie didn't care about acting or a career; her stated life goal was simply to find a rich husband to fund her lifestyle.

Given the rumors of her staggering body count—over ten boys from their year alone—Zoe figured Sophie was certainly putting in the networking hours.

Zoe smiled quietly to herself. Everyone in this room was playing a character.

She forced her eyes back to the front. Mr. Harrison was now writing out the limit of a mathematical function, the marker squeaking against the board as he wrote the complex equation:

$\lim x \to \infty f(x) = L$

Zoe stared at the letters and symbols, but her brain refused to latch onto the syntax.

The numbers blurred. Then, without warning, a melody rose up from somewhere deep in her memory — Roxette's Listen to Your Heart.

The chorus swelled in her mind, completely drowning out the calculus.

She could almost hear Maeve's nagging voice interrupting the music.

"Seriously, Zoe? Roxette? You have total NPC energy. You listen to music like an old lady."

Zoe blinked, shaking the song away, and tried to focus on the whiteboard.

She managed to take a page of decent notes before the math came to a halt.

With ten minutes left on the clock, Mr. Harrison put down his marker.

His shoulders stiffened, and his expression shifted into something grave and heavy. The "doom speech."

"Listen to me carefully," Mr. Harrison said, looking across the rows of teenagers.

"This is Year 13. The training wheels are off. The grades you get this year, and the university choices you make in the coming months, will shape your path forward. Do not sleepwalk through this year. Use the counselors. Use the internet. Talk to people. Make a choice — because if you don't, something will choose for you."

The bell rang, sharp and unforgiving.

Zoe packed her bag.

The suffocating pressure of his words settled heavily on her chest.

By the time she pushed through the double doors into the chilly afternoon air, Maeve was already waiting by the gates.

"Thank God that's over," Maeve sighed, immediately launching into her own monologue.

"I didn't listen to a word of it. I don't even know why I have to stress about uni. I'm an only child; I'm just going to take over my parents' boutique anyway. It's basically passive income."

Zoe walked beside her, nodding mechanically, but her mind was entirely elsewhere. Take over a boutique in Harrogate.

The idea sounded like a prison sentence. She didn't want to stay in this damp, suffocating town.

She wanted to travel. She wanted to disappear into a massive city where she could finally escape the heavy, watchful eyes of her parents and their endless expectations.

Then again, Zoe thought, a wry smile creeping onto her face, maybe Maeve is right.

Maybe I really am an old lady. A cowardly, pathetic old lady who is terrified of her mother's nagging.

They reached the crossroads where their paths split.

"I'm going to grab some food before I head home," Zoe said, pulling her jacket tighter around her.

"I've got my comfortable shoes on. I'm going to do my little walk."

Maeve stopped and stared at her, her jaw dropped in exaggerated disbelief.

"Do not tell me you are still playing that stupid game, Zoe."

"It gets me outside," Zoe said defensively.

"You're walking around the woods collecting virtual friends because you refuse to talk to real ones," Maeve scoffed, though it had a sharp, mocking edge of truth to it.

She turned to walk away, calling out over her shoulder, "Keep it up, Zoe! Keep avoiding real life. Instead of finding a man and having a baby, you're just going to end up hatching a Snorlax! Hahaha!"

Zoe watched her friend walk away. She pulled her phone out of her pocket, opened the app, and turned toward the quiet path leading away from town.

Part 4: The Silent Hit

The late afternoon air turned crisp as Zoe navigated the narrow, cobbled side streets branching off from the town center.

The heavy stone buildings of Harrogate blocked the wind, but they also cast long, cold shadows over the pavement.

Zoe held her phone up, her eyes fixed entirely on the screen:1 minute and 42 seconds.

That was all the time left on the Gym Raid.

It was a five-star raid, an incredibly rare spawn, and the virtual arena sat just on the other side of the alleyway ahead.

If she didn't hurry, she was going to miss the lobby, and she needed this one to finally evolve her main team.

She quickened her pace, her thumb furiously tapping the screen to bypass the animations:1 minute and 15 seconds.

She didn't look up. She didn't need to. She had walked this route a hundred times.

What she didn't know was that a sleek, brand-new electric SUV was turning onto the intersecting street.

It moved with lethal silence, lacking the heavy hum and rumble of a combustion engine.

Behind the wheel, a young man in his twenties was glancing down at his own phone, rapidly typing out a text message to his girlfriend.

Two screens. Two people entirely disconnected from their physical surroundings.

Zoe stepped off the curb, her thumb hovering over the 'Join Raid' button.

She didn't hear the tires against the asphalt. She didn't hear the engine.

The impact was sudden and violent.

The heavy bumper struck her side, throwing her fiercely against the hood before she tumbled backward onto the hard cobblestones.

Her phone flew from her hand, the screen shattering as it hit the pavement.

The vibrant colors of the game flickered violently before dying out.

The EV slammed on its brakes with a sharp screech of rubber, stopping mere feet away.

The young driver threw his door open, his face had drained of color.

He stumbled out, his phone still clutched in his shaking hand.

"Oh my god," he stammered, dropping to his knees beside her.

"Oh my god, I didn't see you. I didn't hear—" He stopped. What hadn't he heard? The engine? Her footsteps?

He didn't even know.

Zoe lay completely still. Her eyes were closed, her breathing shallow and ragged.

She wasn't bleeding heavily, but her skin had gone pale, almost grey.

When the driver touched her arm, she was cold.

"Help!"

the driver screamed, his voice cracking as he scrambled to dial the emergency number. "Somebody help! I need an ambulance!"

A few pedestrians rushed out from the main street. A small crowd quickly formed a tight, panicked circle around her.

Voices overlapped — someone shouting for space, the driver crying into the phone, the distant wail of sirens began to pierce the quiet afternoon air.

But Zoe didn't hear any of it. The noise, the pressure of Year 13, the expectations, the game — it all faded into a heavy, suffocating darkness.

The screen of her life had simply gone black.

Arc II: The Starving

Part 5: The Beggar's Broth

The darkness shattered, replaced by a sudden, violent gasp for air.

Zoe's eyes flew open. The blinding white lights of the hospital she expected were nowhere to be found.

Instead, her vision filled with the dim, hazy glow of a single tallow candle, casting long, trembling shadows across a low ceiling of rotting thatch and mud.

"Mary!"

A pair of hands gripped her shoulders. They were rough, calloused, and frantic.

Zoe tried to pull back, disoriented and terrified, as a woman's face leaned over her.

She looked to be at least fifty, her skin weathered and deeply lined with exhaustion.

Her clothes were little more than coarse, undyed wool, patched and re-patched until the original garment was lost, hanging loosely over a skeletal frame.

But looking closer, past the dark, bruised bags under the woman's eyes, Zoe realized with a shock that this woman wasn't elderly at all.

She was probably no older than thirty-six.

"Mary, you frightened me to death," the woman sobbed, her breath smelling of stale water and fear.

"Your heart… it just stopped beating. I went to call for someone — you know we cannot afford the apothecary, we cannot afford real help — but you drew breath. Oh, thank God. Thank God."

Mary? Zoe's mind spun. My name is Zoe. She tried to speak, to ask about the electric car, to ask for her mother, but her throat was sandpaper.

She looked down at herself. The panic that had been simmering suddenly boiled over.

She lifted her hands into the dim light. They were tiny, the skin dry and cracked at the knuckles, caked with ingrained dirt.

She touched her chest, expecting the familiar shape of her 17-year-old body, but felt only the harsh, protruding ridges of her own ribcage through a thin, coarse linen shift.

She was painfully thin — starved, fragile — but she was still her. Still seventeen. Still Zoe. Just trapped.

"Welcome back to the living, my sweet girl," the woman — Theresa, a name that surfaced from somewhere deep in Zoe's new, unfamiliar memories — whispered, wiping a tear from her soot-stained cheek.

"You must be so hungry. The sickness took everything out of you."

Theresa reached behind her and pulled forward a wooden trencher.

"Look what I brought you. I went to the back doors of the Lord's manor and begged the kitchen maid for their leftovers. It's a treat, Mary. But you must eat it quickly, before your father comes back. If he sees it, he will not even leave you the scraps."

Zoe slowly turned her head. Huddled in the shadows of the cramped, dirt-floored room were three small figures.

Three little girls, maybe nine, five, and three years old. They wore oversized, endlessly mended smocks.

Their eyes were huge, sunken into hollow cheeks, and they were staring unblinkingly at the wooden bowl in Theresa's hands.

Zoe looked down at the food. It was a murky, greasy pottage.

Floating in the lukewarm water were a few chunks of soft, rotting carrots, potato skins, and a pale, rubbery piece of animal skin with the bristles still attached.

The 17-year-old inside her recoiled in absolute disgust. It looked like garbage.

But her body didn't care about modern standards.

A sharp, agonizing cramp twisted in her stomach. She was starving.

A deep, primal, animalistic hunger hijacked her brain — a hunger that told her she hadn't eaten a solid meal in weeks.

Before Zoe could even process the revulsion, her hands shot out.

She grabbed the wooden bowl and brought it to her face, wolfing down the greasy broth and the rubbery skin with massive, desperate bites.

She ate like a starved wolf, chewing loudly in the quiet room, unable to stop herself.

She devoured exactly half of it before her body simply gave out.

The sheer exhaustion of coming back from the brink of death crashed over her like a tidal wave.

Her eyelids fluttered, impossibly heavy.

She let the bowl slip back into Theresa's waiting hands.

The sounds of her three "sisters" quietly scrambling to lick the rest of the bowl clean faded into the background as Zoe closed her eyes and surrendered to the dark of her second night.

Part 6: The Dirt Floor

When Zoe opened her eyes again, the dizzying fever had finally broken.

The sharp, gnawing hunger in her stomach was worse than ever, but for the first time, her vision was perfectly clear.

The hazy shadows of the previous night gave way to cold, gray daylight bleeding through a single shuttered window.

She lay perfectly still, assessing her surroundings. The "house" was nothing more than one large, damp room with a packed dirt floor.

There were only two actual beds, built of rough-hewn wood and stuffed with what looked like dried leaves and straw.

One was clearly for the parents, and the other held the three younger girls.

Zoe wasn't on a bed.

She was huddled in the far, drafty corner of the room on a wretched pile of rags — quarantined to keep her sickness from the rest of the family.

Across the room, the oldest of the three little girls — perhaps nine years old — was already sweeping the dirt floor with a bundle of twigs.

On the children's bed, the two toddlers quietly fought over a crude doll made of tied-off burlap.

Zoe stared at the thatched ceiling, her mind racing to process this impossible reality. She remembered the school.

She remembered the screeching tires, the shattered phone screen, the darkness. Was she dead?

She'd read the books.

Girl gets hit by a car, wakes up in a new world as a noble. Builds an empire.

This wasn't that.

She looked down at her filthy, emaciated hands.

If God was making a bet, this felt like a cruel prank. Was this Hell?

Was she being punished for sleepwalking through her privileged modern life?

She lay there in a dazed, paralyzed state, utterly lost in a world with no instruction manual and no safety nets.

The hours dragged on until the gray light faded into the pitch black of evening.

Theresa returned, her face lined with exhaustion, and lit a single tallow candle.

She brought Zoe a wooden cup filled with a warm, murky beverage that tasted vaguely of boiled roots.

Back in Harrogate, her real mother used to beg her just to eat a healthy salad or a proper dinner.

Now, Zoe didn't hesitate. She gulped the bitter liquid down like a starving lamb, her survival instincts entirely overriding her modern palate.

Then, the heavy wooden door was kicked open.

A large man filled the frame. This was Mathew.

He had a massive barrel-shaped belly, thick arms, and a heavy, unkempt beard framing a harsh, ugly face.

The stench of cheap, sour ale and unwashed sweat rolled off him in waves.

He looked around the room, his bloodshot eyes eventually landing on the corner where Zoe lay.

"Eh. Still alive," Mathew grunted, his voice a deep, gravelly rumble. He pointed a thick, dirt-caked finger at her.

"You need to put some flesh on those bones. Maybe then I can sell you off, find a husband, and finally be rid of you. Who in their right mind wants a woman who looks like that? You're too sick to give a man children, you can't scrub a dish, you can't work the fields. You're just a pain."

He turned his heavy glare toward Theresa, who shrank back against the hearth.

"Every time her belly swelled, I thought the Lord would finally grant me a boy," Mathew spat, gesturing wildly at the room of girls.

"And instead, I end up cursed with a house full of useless eaters and dead weights. I'm going to get a pint with the men."

He turned and stormed out, yelling a curse into the cold night air.

The house plunged into absolute, terrified silence.

No one spoke. The girls just went to sleep.

Deep in the night, the door creaked open again.

Mathew stumbled in, completely drunk. Without a word, he slid onto the straw bed next to Theresa.

Zoe, lying awake in her dark corner, watched in horror as he immediately began pushing himself on his wife.

Theresa tried to resist, her hands pushing weakly against his chest, but after a few brief, pathetic struggles, she simply went limp and let him have his way.

Zoe's hands curled into tight fists in the rags.

What kind of animal is he? Nausea rose in her throat.

He already had four girls he couldn't even afford to feed, and he was forcing himself on his wife in a single room while his children slept just feet away.

A desire to scream flared in her chest. To give him a piece of her mind.

But then she remembered her frail, skin-and-bones body. She was a stranger in a brutal world.

And so, true to the passive nature that defined her entire existence, she swallowed her voice, closed her eyes, and kept it all to herself.

For the next three days, the cycle repeated without fail.

The drinking father came home every night to take his frustrations out on his wife.

The mother woke before dawn, went out to beg for scraps or work small, back-breaking jobs, only to return home to do chores and weep quietly into the ashes of the hearth.

Part 7: The Scholar and the Stone

It started with a slip of the tongue.

One afternoon, while the oldest sister was struggling to count a handful of dried beans for the evening pottage, Zoe muttered that she should group them by tens to multiply them faster.

When Theresa stared at her in shock, Zoe tried to backpedal, tracing a basic numerical grid on the dirt floor to explain.

Theresa immediately scrubbed the dirt clean with her boot. "Stop spouting nonsense," her mother hissed, looking nervously toward the door.

"It is the fever. The sickness is still boiling her brain."

But the nine-year-old had seen it.

The next morning, while fetching water, the girl boasted to the village children that her useless, sick sister could draw magic numbers and read invisible books.

In a village starved for entertainment and paranoid of the unknown, the rumor spread like wildfire.

Two days later, the door to the hut was pushed open not by Mathew, but by a man dressed in fine, heavy wool robes.

He was a traveling scholar, a man of the Church who had heard the whispers of a literate peasant girl.

He stood in the center of the cramped room, his nose wrinkled in disgust at the smell.

He looked down at Zoe, who was huddled in her corner. "They say you claim to read, girl," he sneered.

"A ridiculous notion. A woman's mind is a shallow vessel, fit only for the kitchen and the cradle. What could you possibly know of letters?"

For the first time since she woke up in this nightmare, Zoe felt a spark of her old life flare up.

In Harrogate, she was an A-student. She wasn't useless. She wanted to prove to this arrogant man that she had value.

"I know Shakespeare," Zoe croaked, her voice trembling but defiant.

"I know mathematics. Algebra, geometry…" She struggled to remember her A-Level English, reciting the first lines that came to her.

"To be, or not to be, that is the question: Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune…"

She thought he would be amazed.

She thought he would recognize genius and pull her out of this squalor.

Instead, the scholar's face drained of color.

He took a terrified step back, making the sign of the cross. To him, this wasn't literature;

it was an ungodly chant. A filthy, uneducated, starving girl speaking in strange cadences and talking of "algebra" — a word rooted in Arabic, foreign and terrifying to a medieval zealot — could only mean one thing.

"Devil's tongue!" the scholar gasped, tripping over the threshold as he fled the hut. "She is possessed! A witch!"

That night, Mathew didn't go to the tavern. He came straight home, his face purple with rage.

He didn't ask questions. He unbuckled his heavy leather belt and beat her.

He beat her until her vision swam, screaming that she was bringing the Church's fire down upon his house.

Broken, Zoe retreated entirely. She stopped talking. She stopped trying to use her brain.

She curled into a ball in her rags, realizing that her advanced modern knowledge meant nothing if she didn't have the power to protect herself.

But it was too late. The silence didn't save her.

Over the next few weeks, the village's paranoia mutated.

If a crop failed, it was the witch's fault. If milk soured, it was Mary.

Then, the rumors turned malicious: they claimed she was jealous of healthy girls and was casting curses to prevent women from finding husbands.

The village demanded a scapegoat, and Mathew was more than happy to oblige.

To save his own skin, he dragged his sickly daughter out of the hut by her hair and threw her into the muddy street.

Theresa stood in the doorway, weeping silently, but did nothing to stop him.

Zoe became something less than human.

For days, she lived in the alleys between the wattle-and-daub houses, shivering in the mud, surviving on whatever rotting scraps she could dig out of the refuse.

One gray, freezing afternoon, she was huddled against a stone wall when a shadow fell over her.

"You!"

Zoe looked up. A woman she had never seen before — a baker's daughter, her face twisted in pure, hysterical hatred — was standing over her.

"You ruined it!" the woman shrieked, pointing a trembling finger at Zoe.

"The blacksmith's son broke our betrothal today! It was you! You cursed my womb! You broke my marriage, you filthy hag!"

Zoe stared at her, numb and exhausted.

I don't even know you.

She didn't have the energy to speak.

She didn't have the energy to defend herself. She simply turned her head away, staring at the mud, waiting for the woman to leave.

Then she saw it — the woman's arm rising, the heavy cobblestone clenched in her fist, the shadow of it falling across the muddy ground.

Zoe never saw the impact coming.

There was a sickening crack.

A blinding flash of white light erupted behind Zoe's eyes, followed instantly by a warm, wet flood of blood poured down the side of her face.

She collapsed into the cold mud, her vision swimming as the screaming woman stood over her.

For the second time in her life, the world faded into a heavy, suffocating black.

Arc III: The Ornament

Part 8: The Gilded Cage

The darkness did not end with a sharp crack or a blinding flash of pain.

It simply melted away into a sinking, enveloping warmth.

Zoe slowly opened her eyes.

She was staring up at a canopy of heavy, embroidered linen.

Beneath her, she wasn't lying on packed dirt or rags, but sinking into a mattress stuffed with goose down.

"My lady?" a gentle voice whispered nearby.

Zoe carefully turned her head, half-expecting to feel the warm rush of blood from the cobblestone, but there was only a dull, pulsing ache near her temple.

A young maid in a simple wool dress was hovering near the bed, holding a silver basin of steaming water.

The maid's eyes widened. She turned quickly toward the heavy oak door. "Sir! Sir, she has opened her eyes!"

Heavy, urgent footsteps echoed across the floor. A man rushed into her line of sight.

He looked to be about fifty-five, his face lined with the deep stress of a man who managed a massive merchant empire.

He wore a heavy tunic of deep, imported crimson, fastened at the shoulder by a gleaming gold brooch.

"Lucia," the man breathed, dropping to his knees beside the bed and taking her smooth, uncalloused hand in his.

His voice was thick with relief. "The physician said the swelling was grave. When that beast of a horse threw you against the courtyard wall… I thought I had lost you."

Lucia.

Zoe let the name wash over her. She didn't panic. She didn't try to correct him.

After Mary, nothing surprised her anymore.

She simply let her eyes drift past her "father" to take in the room.

It was massive. The floors beneath the thick animal skin rugs were laid with intricate stone mosaics.

The walls, built of sturdy timber and stone, were draped with rich green and red tapestries that kept the coastal chill completely at bay.

There was no smell of rotting cabbage or stale sweat here.

The air was thick with the scent of burning beeswax and dried lavender.

Over the next few weeks, as she recovered from the fall, Lucia let the reality of her new life wrap around her like a warm blanket.

She learned to navigate the sprawling, fortified villa of her wealthy merchant father.

She let the maids dress her in under-tunics of fine, bleached linen and vibrant blue stolas.

When the nightmares of Mary — the mud, the screaming baker's daughter, the scholar — threatened to surface, Lucia pushed them down with the sheer weight of her new comforts.

She ate soft, snow-white bread dipped in sweet honey. She ate roasted fowl dripping with spiced fat.

She drank watered wine that warmed her throat. She ate until she was full, burying the ghost of the starving girl she had been.

One bright afternoon, she was resting on a padded wooden bench in her bedchamber when the heavy door swung open.

Two girls, dressed in equally fine linens and elaborate braids, hurried into the room.

"Lucia! You look so much better," Flavia announced, sweeping over to press a theatrical kiss to her cheek.

Everything about Flavia was performative — the gestures, the sighs, the way she held a pause.

"We were terrified," Cassia added, sharper and more direct. She sat at the edge of the bed without waiting for an invitation, adjusting the folds of her dress.

"When we heard about the horse, we thought we would be wearing mourning veils by the end of the week."

"I am perfectly fine now," Lucia said softly, offering a polite smile.

"Thank heavens," Flavia sighed, waving a hand dismissively.

"Because if you had died, we would have had no one to talk to at Lord Odo's feast tomorrow. Have you heard about his daughter? They say her father lost two ships to a storm, and they can barely afford to feed their own servants now."

Cassia leaned in closer, her eyes glittering. "And her betrothed is practically fifty. I would throw myself into the sea."

Lucia sat quietly, listening to the hollow, endless chatter. She looked out the narrow window at the high stone walls of the villa and the armed guards patrolling the courtyard below.

She didn't care about Lord Odo's daughter. She didn't care about the trade politics of the channel.

But as Flavia and Cassia gossiped, Lucia just took a slow sip of her watered wine and nodded along.

"Absolutely," Lucia murmured. "Such a tragedy."

She smiled, leaning back against the velvet pillows. It was nice here.

She didn't have to think about math, or survival, or what to do with her future.

She was a merchant's precious daughter, safe behind high walls, content to sit back and let the easy, glittering current of this life carry her.

Part 9: Velvet Pouch

As the weeks turned into months, Lucia's life settled into a slow, honey-thick predictability.

The sprawling stone villa was a hub of constant, masculine chaos.

Her two older brothers, Cassian and Julian, were always moving.

They returned from dangerous trading voyages across the Channel with their skin burned by the sun, their voices booming in the great hall as they argued with their father over the price of Frankish timber, Baltic amber, and iron.

They were the heirs, the active players in the family's growing empire.

Lucia, along with her ten-year-old sister Elara, belonged to a different world entirely.

If her brothers were the sword and the coin of the family, Lucia was the velvet pouch they were kept in. She quickly learned that the expectations for a wealthy merchant's daughter in this era were stunningly simple: she was an ornament, and eventually, a bargaining chip.

Her "education" was a needle, a thread, and the same three embroidery patterns repeated until her fingers ached.

Instead of calculus or history, her days were measured by the rhythm of bone piercing stretched linen.

She spent hours in the sunlit upper rooms with the older maids, learning to stitch intricate vines and birds onto heavy cloaks using expensive, brightly dyed threads.

If she pricked her finger, a servant was there immediately to dab away the blood so it wouldn't stain the fabric.

In the late afternoons, when the household was quiet, she and Elara were taught to play the lyre and to memorize the light, measured steps of courtly dances.

Lucia found it boringly easy. She didn't have to study for an exam;

she just had to pluck the right strings, smile perfectly, and keep her posture straight.

Her father doted on her, often bringing her small, carved trinkets or fine combs from his travels, patting her head with a heavy, affectionate hand.

She knew, in the back of her mind, that this pampering had an expiration date.

Her father was grooming her for an alliance. Someday soon, she would be traded to another wealthy family to secure a port or a shipping lane.

But she ignored the looming reality of her arranged marriage.

She simply went with the flow, letting the days blur together in a haze of fine food, soft music, and mindless repetition.

But even a gilded cage can feel stifling.

When the chatter of her younger sister grew too loud, or when her fingers cramped from holding the needle, Lucia would seek out her only real escape.

She would leave the heavy stone walls of the main house and slip out the back doors into the villa's expansive, enclosed garden.

It was a beautiful, manicured sanctuary. High stone walls kept the noise of the coastal winds and the bustling merchant town completely at bay.

Apple trees with thick, twisted trunks provided deep pools of shade.

The air always smelled of damp earth and blooming rosemary.

It was during one of these quiet afternoon strolls, the hem of her blue stola brushing against the trimmed grass, that she realized she was not alone.

She paused near a stone bench and looked up. Standing near the arched wooden gate that led to the servant's quarters was a young man she had never seen before.

He carried a heavy ledger under his arm — not a servant's tool, but a merchant's.

His clothes were simple but well-made, his dark hair falling slightly across his forehead.

He looked up.

Their eyes met across the rosemary. Something flickered across his face — recognition? curiosity?

— before he quickly bowed his head and continued toward the servant's gate.

Lucia did not call out to him.

She simply watched him go, her hand resting motionless on the cold stone of the bench.

Part 10: The Forbidden Fruit

The first time their paths crossed, it was barely an interaction.

The young man with the ledger stopped, offered a crisp, perfectly measured bow, and simply said, "My lady," before disappearing through the wooden gate.

The next afternoon, he was there again. This time, he didn't just bow.

He caught her eye and offered a slow, lingering smile.

For the first time, Lucia really saw him.

He was perhaps twenty years old, tall and broadly built, with the kind of functional, muscular strength that came from working the docks and loading heavy merchant crates.

Yet, unlike the rough sailors her brothers drank with, he carried himself with a sharp, deliberate grace.

His dark hair curled slightly at the nape of his neck, and his eyes held a confident, piercing warmth.

On the third day, Lucia walked out to the garden earlier than usual.

She paced the length of the stone wall, her eyes flicking constantly toward the servant's gate.

But the garden remained empty. A sharp pang of disappointment settled in her chest.

She had spent all day anticipating that smile, and without it, the garden just felt like another enclosed room.

She was caught.

So, when she returned on the fourth day and found him leaning against the trunk of an apple tree, her heart gave a sudden, eager leap.

This time, he didn't just smile. He stepped forward and introduced himself as Marc, an apprentice clerk for her father's northern trade route.

And then, he began to talk.

He didn't talk about local gossip or embroidery.

He spun stories of the world across the Channel. He told her about Francia, about navigating the mouth of the river Seine, and about the grand city of Paris.

He painted pictures with his words of King Clovis's court, the massive Roman stone palace situated on an island in the middle of the river, and the ancient, overgrown arenas where gladiators used to fight.

For two weeks, this became their secret ritual. Every evening, as the sun dipped below the stone walls and bathed the garden in twilight, Lucia would slip out to meet him.

She hung on his every word. He made the world sound so vast, so exciting, and so completely within reach.

Then came the evening he finally crossed the line.

The air was cooling, and the shadows were growing long. Marc stepped closer to her than he ever had before. Instead of a ledger, he reached into his tunic and pulled out a small, smooth piece of sea-glass, worn down by the tide. He pressed it gently into her palm.

"I found this on the shores of Francia weeks ago," Marc murmured, his voice dropped to a soft, intimate register. "I carried it across the Channel in my pocket. I didn't know why I kept a piece of broken glass... until I met you."

His rough fingers lingered against hers. Lucia's breath hitched.

"You spend your whole life locked behind these walls, surrounded by things your father bought," he whispered, stepping closer. "I wanted you to have something real. Something from the outside world. I have seen the grand halls of kings, my lady... but none of it compares to the quiet of this garden when you are in it.. I… I wrote this for you."

He reached into his tunic and produced a small, folded piece of coarse parchment. He didn't hand it to her;

instead, he softly recited the words he had written:

"Like the morning star that parts the dark and misty sea,

My heart awakens when sweet Lucy smiles at me."

"Lucy," he whispered, stepping back with a look of practiced vulnerability.

"If I may be so bold to call you that."

Lucia felt a hot flush rise to her cheeks.

"You may," she breathed.

That night, Lucia lay in her massive, goose-down bed, staring up at the embroidered canopy.

Her heart was racing. She clutched the rough piece of parchment to her chest.

This is it, she thought, a giddy, triumphant smile spread across her face in the dark.

She deserved this.

After Harrogate. After Mary. This was her reward.

In Harrogate, she was a side character in Maeve's life.

In the 1500s, she was a victim. But here? Here, she was the protagonist.

She was the beautiful, wealthy daughter who had caught the eye of the handsome, poetic commoner.

This was exactly how the stories were supposed to go.

She had entirely forgotten her past.

She was perfectly content to let Marc take her by the hand and lead her through the script of a fairy tale.

Part 11: The Strongbox

The summons to her father's study came two days later, just after the morning meal.

Lucia walked in, expecting to be gifted another carved comb or a length of silk.

Instead, her father was sitting behind his heavy oak table, unrolling a wax-sealed parchment with a broad, satisfied smile.

"Sit, my flower," he said, gesturing to a stool. "I have wonderful news. The spring tides bring more than just goods this year. I have finally secured a permanent foothold in the Frankish courts."

Lucia smiled, though she cared little for trade routes. "That is wonderful, Father."

"It is," he agreed, his eyes gleaming with pride. "And it is all thanks to you. You are of age, Lucia, and I have arranged a marriage that will elevate this family for generations. You are to be wed to Lord Renaud, a master merchant of Boulogne."

Lucia's polite smile froze. She knew that name. Her brothers had mocked Lord Renaud before. He was fifty-seven years old.

He was a widower known for his foul temper, a man with a rotting jaw and a belly swollen from gout.

"Father, no," she stammered, the blood drained from her face.

"He… he is an old man. He has a son who is thirty! A daughter who is twenty-five! They already have children of their own!"

"And?" Her father frowned, the warmth leaving his face, replaced by the cold calculation of a businessman.

"You will be the lady of a massive estate. You will want for nothing, and when his time comes, you will inherit a fortune. It is decided, Lucia. The ship arrives to take you to Francia at the end of the month."

He dismissed her with a wave of his hand, turning back to his ledgers.

Lucia stumbled out of the study, her breath coming in short, panicked gasps. She was seventeen.

She refused to be shipped off to an ugly, rotting grandfather just to secure a dock in Boulogne.

She was not a piece of cargo.

That evening, Lucia ran to the garden.

Marc was already there, waiting by the apple tree. The moment she saw him, the panic in her chest hardened into something else — fierce, reckless, romantic.

She threw her arms around him, burying her face in his chest.

"Lucy, what is it?"

he asked, his hands coming to rest on her waist.

"My father is marrying me off," she whispered fiercely.

"To a monster. A fifty-seven-year-old widower." She looked up at him, her eyes shining with unshed tears.

"I won't do it, Marc. I love you. I want to be with you."

She didn't care if it was too fast. It felt right.

Marc's jaw tightened.

He looked away and said, "Lucy… I am but a clerk. If your father catches us, he will have my head on a spike. And I cannot provide for you the way a lord can. I have nothing."

"You have me," she insisted, gripping his tunic. A bold, thrilling plan took shape in her mind.

This was her moment. This was where the heroine takes control of her destiny.

"We will run away. We will go to Paris, just like you told me about. We will have a proper wedding, and you can find work in the King's city."

"But the coin for passage…" he started hesitantly.

"I will get the coin," she said, her voice steady and full of sudden bravery.

"My father keeps a strongbox in his study. I know where the key is hidden. Meet me at the smuggler's cove past the docks at midnight."

Marc looked at her, his eyes dark and unreadable in the twilight. Slowly, he nodded.

"For you, my sweet Lucy. I would risk the world."

That night, Lucia did not sleep.

When the villa fell completely silent, she slipped out of her goose-down bed.

Moving like a shadow, she crept downstairs into the study.

Her heart hammered a wild, triumphant rhythm against her ribs as she retrieved the heavy leather purse of silver Roman and Frankish coins.

She was doing it. She was breaking the rules and claiming her own life.

She wore a heavy woolen cloak over her dress, pulling the hood up as she slipped out the servant's gate.

The night air was freezing, thick with the smell of brine and seaweed, but she didn't care.

She hurried down the muddy path toward the cove. Marc was there, waiting beside a small, swaying skiff hired from a local fisherman.

He helped her aboard, taking the heavy purse of silver from her trembling hands to stow it safely.

As the boat pushed off the gravel shore and slipped into the dark, churning waters of the Channel, Lucia sat at the bow.

The cold wind whipped her hair. She looked back at the receding stone walls of her father's villa.

She smiled.

She had done it. She had finally taken charge.

Part 12: The Crossing

The crossing was brutal.

The small wooden skiff pitched and rolled over the black, churning swells of the Channel, freezing water sprayed over the bow.

But Lucia did not feel the biting cold.

She sat huddled in the center of the boat, enveloped entirely in Marc's heavy wool cloak, her back pressed flush against his chest.

Every time the skiff dipped into a trough, his strong arms tightened protectively around her waist, anchoring her.

She looked up at the vast, silver spray of stars stretching toward the Frankish coast, her heart soared with a fierce, wild joy.

She had done it. She had defied her powerful father, rejected the miserable fate of an arranged marriage, and seized her own destiny.

She wasn't a passive ornament waiting to be traded anymore. She was a woman who took action for love.

By the time they reached the northern port town the next morning, exhausted and salt-stained, the world felt entirely new.

The port was loud, muddy, and reeked of fish and unwashed sailors. Through Lucia's eyes, the filth vanished.

This was the gateway to her own kingdom.

With the silver coins safely tucked away, Marc secured them a room on the second floor of a bustling timber-framed hostel.

They needed to hide out for three days until the weekly merchant carriages departed for Paris.

The room was modest.

The floorboards sloped, the hearth was small, and the mattress was stuffed with rough straw rather than goose down.

But to Lucia, it was a palace. It was the first space in the world that belonged entirely to her and the man she chose.

Those first two days were a blur of intoxicating romance.

They did not leave the room, hiding from the eyes of the port.

They spent hours huddled together by the small fire, eating fresh bread and sharing a single cup of cheap wine.

At one point, Marc plucked a sprig of dried rosemary from the hearth and tucked it behind her ear, kissing her nose like she was something precious.

They laughed in hushed whispers.

When the sun set and the cold crept through the wooden walls, they slipped under the heavy wool blankets.

Marc would pull her close, his rough hands warm against her skin, and spin beautiful, vivid dreams of their future.

He talked of a small, whitewashed house near the river Seine, where he would work as a scribe in the King's court and she would plant a garden of her own.

His kisses tasted of wine and salt, deep and demanding, stealing her breath away.

When his hands slipped beneath the linen of her stola, tracing the curve of her waist and pulling her flush against his chest, her entire body hummed with a thrilling, terrifying heat.

But as his lips trailed down her neck, Lucia gently brought her hands up, catching his wrists.

She looked up into his dark eyes, her own shining with total adoration.

She wanted him, more than she had ever wanted anything, but the fairy tale required a specific ending.

She was the heroine, and she wanted the culmination of her grand romance to be flawless.

"In Paris," she whispered, pressing a tender kiss to his knuckles.

"When we stand before the priest, and I am truly yours in the eyes of God. I want our first night to be perfect."

Marc looked at her in the dim light of the dying fire.

He let out a soft breath, his thumb brushed her cheekbone, and nodded.

He kissed her forehead, wrapping his arms around her and pulling her head to rest against his chest.

Lucia closed her eyes, listening to the steady, reassuring rhythm of his heartbeat.

She drifted to sleep enveloped in his warmth, dreaming of the small stone chapel in Paris, absolutely certain that she was the luckiest woman in the world.

Part 13: The Letter Opener

The third night in the hostel, the wind howled through the timber slats, but Lucia felt only warmth.

Marc had gone downstairs to the common room to secure a jug of ale and check on the carriage schedule to Paris.

Left alone in the small room, Lucia felt a restless, giddy energy bubbling in her chest.

She didn't want to just sit and wait. She wanted a taste of the adventure she had chosen.

Spotting Marc's spare, oversized woolen tunic draped over a chair, a playful idea took root.

She pulled it on over her linen shift. It swallowed her frame, the sleeves falling past her hands, but it made her smile.

She felt like a character in one of the songs the traveling minstrels sang.

Quietly, she opened the heavy oak door and crept barefoot down the wooden stairs, intending to surprise him.

The common room was dimly lit by a dying hearth.

The sailors and merchants had mostly retired, leaving only a few shadows in the corners.

Lucia paused on the bottom step. Marc was standing near the back wall, but he wasn't buying ale.

He was pressed close to a young, pretty tavern girl with dark hair and a dirt-smudged apron.

Marc's hand was resting intimately on her waist.

Lucia froze. Her breath caught.

She pressed herself against the wooden banister, hidden in the dark stairwell.

"You promised you wouldn't take her," the tavern girl whispered, her voice tight with jealousy.

"I had to," Marc muttered, his voice stripped of the poetic softness he used in the garden.

It was hard, impatient, and transactional. "The old man was marrying her off to a Frankish lord. It was now or never. Do you think I want to spend my life hauling crates for her arrogant brothers?"

"But you played the lover. You wrote her poetry."

Marc let out a low, cruel laugh.

"I paid a scholar two shillings to write that rubbish. I spent two days of my life pretending to care about her little garden walks. She's a stupid, plain little merchant's daughter who thinks she's a princess because her father buys her silk."

Lucia's hands went numb. The oversized tunic suddenly felt like a burial shroud.

"Just wait," Marc continued, leaning in to kiss the tavern girl's neck.

"Once we are wed and I have my hands on a piece of her father's trade, I will send for you. I just have to tolerate her until the ink is dry."

The fairy tale shattered into a thousand jagged pieces. Her vision darkened at the edges. She couldn't breathe.

She took a blind, stumbling step backward on the stairs.

The wooden floorboard let out a loud, sharp creak.

Marc's head snapped up. His eyes locked onto her in the shadows. The tavern girl gasped, pulling away.

For a second, the world stopped. Then the pure, unadulterated terror of her reality set in. Lucia turned and bolted up the stairs, her bare feet slipping on the wood.

"Lucia!" Marc barked, his heavy boots pounding on the steps behind her.

She slammed the door to their room and fumbled wildly for the iron latch, but before she could drop it into place, a heavy shoulder crashed into the wood.

The door flew open, knocking Lucia to the floor.

Marc stepped inside, his chest heaving, and kicked the door shut behind him.

The poetic lover was entirely gone. His eyes were cold, calculating, and furious.

"I am going home," Lucia stammered, scrambling backward until her spine hit the rough plaster wall.

Tears streamed down her face. "I am taking the coin. My father will forgive me. He loves me."

"Your father will skin me alive," Marc spat, taking a slow step toward her.

He looked down at her with absolute disgust. "Do you think I will let you ruin my life? Ruin my family's chance to eat? You sit in your walled garden, playing with your embroidery, crying about how hard it is to be rich. I sleep on an empty stomach. I break my back so you can wear soft shoes."

"Don't touch me!" she screamed.

"I should have taken the silver and sold you to a Frankish brothel the moment we stepped off the boat," Marc hissed, his voice dropped into a lethal register.

"And I would have, if I wasn't afraid of your father's fleet tracking me down."

He knelt down, grabbing her jaw with a bruising grip and forcing her to look at him.

"You should be on your knees thanking me," he sneered.

"Look in a mirror, Lucia. You are plain. You are nothing. All the beauties in the port run after me, and I chose to elevate you. I was

willing to wait until the wedding to give you your little princess dream, but since you want to act like a spoiled child, we will do this the hard way."

His free hand grabbed the collar of her oversized tunic, ripping it downward.

"Once the deed is done, you will be ruined," he said, his breath hot against her face as she thrashed and kicked.

"Your father will have no choice. He will marry you to me to save his honor, give me a steward's post, and I am set for life."

He threw his heavy body over hers, pinning her to the floorboards.

Lucia screamed — a wild, primal sound of pure desperation.

Her arm flailed across the floor, her fingers desperately searching the darkness.

They brushed against the sharp, heavy iron letter opener Marc had used earlier to cut the wax seal on the carriage schedule.

Her fingers wrapped tightly around the cold iron handle.

For Mary. For the starving girl in the mud.

For every time she stayed silent.

As Marc tore at her linen shift, pinning her shoulder down, Lucia drove the iron spike upward with everything she had left.

The blade sank deep into Marc's left eye.

He let out a deafening, agonizing roar.

He reeled backward, blood spurting over his face and hands.

In his blind, explosive rage, his hand scrambled across the hearth stones. He grabbed a heavy iron fire poker.

Before Lucia could even sit up, he swung it down with terrifying force.

The iron connected with the side of her head with a sickening crunch.

The small, cold room, the blood, and the shattered dreams vanished instantly, replaced by a warm, flooding darkness.

Arc IV: The Stillness

Part 14: The Companion

There was no sudden gasp for air.

No smell of damp earth, no freezing coastal wind.

Zoe woke up to absolute, sterile stillness.

The air was cool and scentless — no lavender, no brine, no rotting cabbage. Nothing.

She opened her eyes, finding herself staring at a perfectly smooth, unblemished white ceiling.

The room was empty, devoid of any visible screens, buttons, or medical equipment.

The ghost of Marc's heavy iron poker still echoed in her skull.

Her heart hammered in her chest, a wild, terrified bird.

She tried to scramble backward, to kick, to raise her hands to protect her face.

Nothing happened.

Panic flooded her chest, then hardened into something rawer. It wasn't that she was tied down — it was that she couldn't feel her body at all.

From the neck down, she was entirely numb, anchored to the bed.

"Your vitals spiked significantly, Sam. Heart rate is at elevated trauma levels," a voice said.

It wasn't coming from a speaker; it seemed to resonate softly from the walls themselves.

It was warm, pleasant, and completely synthetic. "Do you require a neurological sedative?"

Sam. Another new name. Another new trap.

"Where am I?" she rasped, her voice weak and reedy. "Why can't I move? What did you do to me?"

"I am the Companion automation assigned to your unit," the voice replied smoothly.

"No one has done anything to you. You were born with complete motor paralysis. Normally, this genetic anomaly is detected and resolved prior to gestation. However, your mother was stationed on an outer-planet mineral extraction facility at the time. She lacked access to standard genetic screening and did not realize she was pregnant until it was too late to intervene. She visits you once per solar cycle."

Sam let out a bitter, exhausted breath. Once a year. Of course. Another life where she was a burden.

Another life where the people who were supposed to care for her couldn't be bothered.

"Are we in the UK? France?" she demanded, testing the boundaries of her new prison.

"Those geopolitical borders dissolved over three centuries ago," the Companion answered. "You are in the Northern Continental Habitation Sector."

"So, what is this?" Sam spat, the betrayal of her last life dripping from every word.

"A utopia? Let me guess, everyone is perfectly happy, nobody lies, and nobody kills you just to get a promotion?"

"Major crimes are a statistical anomaly, yes," the Companion stated objectively.

"Currency is obsolete. Humanity operates on a framework of mutual optimization."

Sam's eyes narrowed at the white ceiling.

She thought of Mathew in the 1500s beating her to save his own skin.

She thought of Marc twisting a fairy tale into a business transaction.

"You're lying," Sam said.

"Or whoever programmed you is lying. Human beings are greedy. It's in our nature. We want things. And the resources on this planet — or any planet — are limited. If resources are limited, someone is always going to want more than their share. And that means war. It always means war."

"Your logic is based on outdated models of scarcity and hoarding," the Companion replied patiently.

"The issue was never a lack of resources; the issue was management and distribution."

"Oh, right. So you just magically have enough for everyone?"

"We do," the AI said.

"In your historical references, one corner of the planet would systematically dump surplus food into the oceans to stabilize market prices, while another corner of the same planet starved to death. We eliminated the artificial scarcity. There is no dumping. There is no starving. It is simply a matter of logistics."

Sam gritted her teeth. Her mind, freed from the distraction of moving her body, was firing on all cylinders.

She wanted to punch a hole in this machine's logic.

"What about space? What about families?" Sam argued.

"What if everyone decides they want five children and a massive estate? The math doesn't work. The planet fills up. Then what?"

"You are assuming uniform desire," the Companion countered softly. "Human needs and desires are highly varied. While one individual might desire two children, another individual desires none at all. One person may want to spend their life in a solitary observation post, while another thrives in a dense, communal sector. The system relies on communication. As long as there is an open exchange of data and dialogue, variables balance out. We do not suppress desires; we simply manage the variance."

Sam fell silent. She tried to find a flaw in the reasoning, a crack in the armor.

But the logic was clean.

She hated that it made sense. She wanted to argue.

She wanted to scream that the AI was wrong, that people were monsters, that she had the scars to prove it.

But the brutal, exhausting truth was that the Companion's words fit together like perfectly cut stones. No gaps. No contradictions.

Her anger, sharp and hot from Marc's betrayal, slowly began to cool into something much deeper: genuine, profound curiosity.

Part 15: The Final Variables

The white room fell silent.

Sam did not argue back.

She couldn't. For a long, unmeasured stretch of time, she just lay perfectly still beneath the unblemished ceiling, letting the Companion's words settle into the deep, bruised corners of her mind.

Without the ability to move, to fidget, or to run away, she was trapped entirely with her own thoughts.

She thought of Mathew's violent shouts echoing in the dirt-floored hut.

She thought of Marc's cold, transactional sneer in that freezing coastal hostel, the heavy iron poker swinging down toward her skull.

Human history had been a relentless, bloody struggle for survival, driven by fear and scarcity.

To hear that it could simply be… managed by logic and communication left her completely at a loss.

"Companion?"

Sam asked softly, her voice still weak.

"I am here, Sam."

“Do you have music?” she asked.

A strange, desperate nostalgia tugged at her chest. She needed an anchor, something familiar to bridge the gap between the mud of the Middle Ages and this sterile, paralyzing future.

“Can you play Roxette? An old band.”

There was a fraction of a second of silence as the AI accessed archives centuries deep.

“Retrieving audio files from the late twentieth century.”

The soft, synthesized opening chords of Listen to Your Heart drifted from the very walls of the room.

Here I am, centuries in the future, and still an old virgin, she thought. She smiled.

Sam closed her eyes.

The irony was funny. She had no feeling in her limbs, no control over her own physical existence, yet the music washed over her with a clarity she had never experienced in Harrogate.

She let the melody carry her for a while, resting in the safety of a room where no one wanted to hurt her, because no one needed anything from her.

As the song faded out, the questions returned. The fear was gone, replaced entirely by an active, hungry curiosity.

“If society is just about managing logistics,” Sam murmured, keeping her eyes closed, “what do people believe in? Is there still religion?”

"Belief structures are classified under Tier-1 Privacy Settings," the Companion replied, lowering the music's volume to a whisper.

"Like sexual orientation or internal identity, it is considered a private metric. Individuals are free to discuss and practice their chosen beliefs, but the network does not track, label, or impose them. It is a fundamental personal boundary."

Sam smiled weakly. No labels. No arrogant scholars screaming "witch" because she knew algebra. Just pure, unbothered privacy.

"So everyone is equal?" she pressed, enjoying the intellectual sparring.

"It is not about equality. It is about equity," the Companion corrected gently.

"Equality dictates everyone receives one vehicle. Equity recognizes that one individual may need a standard vehicle, a specialized transit pod for their profession, and a high-velocity craft for extreme sports. As long as your personal pursuits do not impede the freedom or resources of others, they are supported."

"And what if someone wants a hundred cars?" Sam asked, a genuine, wry amusement entering her raspy voice.

"Just to show off? Just to prove they are better than everyone else?"

"Individuals displaying compulsive hoarding or pathological greed are escorted to specialized psychological treatment centers," the AI stated pleasantly.

"Such behavior is not a marker of success. It is treated as a severe emotional deficiency."

Sam let out a breathy, fragile laugh. It made so much sense.

"What about crime? School?"

"Major crimes are a statistical anomaly. Our educational framework prevents them. For the first three years of cognitive development, children are not taught data, equations, or historical facts. They are taught strictly how to recognize boundaries, how to respect autonomy, how to apply logic, and how to think critically. Once they know how to think, the acquisition of knowledge is trivial."

Sam's breath hitched. Once they know how to think. It was the ultimate answer.

The modern educational system she had left behind had stuffed her brain full of complex formulas and standardized tests, but it had never taught her how to actually navigate reality.

She had been an empty vessel, waiting for a teacher, a parent, or a lover to pour a script into her.

But here, completely paralyzed, she was finally using her own mind to interrogate the world.

She felt a sudden, heavy pressure blooming in the center of her chest.

The numb sensation in her limbs was creeping higher, crawling up her neck and sinking into her jaw.

The room's crisp, white light began to dim at the edges.

"Your cardiac rhythm is entering terminal decline, Sam," the Companion announced, its synthetic voice remaining perfectly warm and steady.

She wasn't afraid. There was no terror, no desperate thrashing against the inevitable.

She had needed to lose everything — her comfort, her illusions, her mobility — to finally understand the absolute sovereignty of her own mind.

"Companion?" Sam whispered, her voice fading into a tiny, frayed thread.

"I am here."

"Are there… aliens?"

Before the AI could respond, the room echoed with a single, continuous tone.

Beeeeeeeeeeeeep.

The white ceiling faded entirely into pitch black. As the heavy darkness rushed in to claim her, erasing the sterile room and the AI's voice, her final, coherent thought was a mix of quiet amusement and wild curiosity.

What's next? Am I waking up in the Stone Age to fight dinosaurs with my bare hands?

Or is this just the end?

Arc V: The Compass

Part 16: The Beep

The darkness did not end with a beep.

It ended with a blinding, sterile light.

Zoe gasped, her eyes snapping open.

The ceiling was white, but not the smooth, glowing pearl of the Companion's room.

It was made of cheap, textured tiles. The harsh smell of antiseptic and bleach burned her nose.

A face suddenly leaned over her. A woman in blue scrubs, holding a small penlight.

"Oh, thank goodness," the nurse breathed, clicking the light off.

"Sweetheart? Can you hear me? Can you tell me your name, and what year it is?"

Zoe froze.

Her heart hammered against her ribs. What name? What year? Was it 1500? Was it 500? Was she Sam? Lucia?

Mary? She stared at the nurse, terrified to answer, terrified to guess the wrong century.

The heavy door flew off its hinges.

"Zoe! Zoe!"

A woman burst into the room, her face pale and streaked with tears.

It was her mother. Her real mother. She was wearing a crumpled trench coat, her hair a chaotic mess, looking nothing like the composed woman from Harrogate.

Zoe let out a shaky, desperate exhale. Slowly, tentatively, she brought her hands up to her chest.

She felt the familiar curve of her own small breasts.

She had never been so profoundly grateful for her own plain, ordinary body. She could move her arms.

She wasn't starving. She wasn't a pawn.

She looked from the nurse to her mother, her voice trembling but certain.

"I am Zoe, Mom. What… what happened? I was… the car…"

Her mother practically collapsed over the bed, burying her face in Zoe's neck and sobbing.

"You were hit. Oh, my baby, you've been in a coma for two weeks. They had to move you to London for the neurological tests, I've been here the whole time…"

"Alright, Mum, let her breathe," the nurse interrupted gently, checking the monitors.

"I need to page the doctor. We have a lot of tests to run now that she's awake. If you could step outside for just a moment?"

Her mother kissed Zoe's forehead fiercely and stepped out into the hallway.

Through the glass, Zoe watched her immediately pull out her phone, her hands shaking as she dialed Zoe's father.

The rest of the day was a blur of flashing lights, reflex tests, and questions.

Late in the afternoon, the door opened again. Her father walked in, looking ten years older, followed closely by her mother.

"The doctor gave us thirty minutes," her father said, taking her hand. His voice was thick with emotion.

"If the final scans come back clear, we can check you out tomorrow. I can monitor your vitals from home. Home is exactly what you need for a fast recovery."

"Your friends have been so worried," her mother added, wiping her eyes and pointing to a small table loaded with vases.

"Maeve came by the house twice. And look at all these flowers. There is even a bouquet without a card… I think our Zoe might have a secret admirer."

Zoe just stared at the flowers. She was in a total trance. She couldn't believe she was actually back.

Had it all just been a dream? Like when you fall asleep for five minutes, but your brain hallucinates an entire week?

Lifetimes of starvation, betrayal, and futuristic paralysis, all condensed into a two-week coma?

"Well, you just focus on resting tonight," her mother said briskly, adjusting her purse as the nurse signaled their time was up.

The old, familiar Harrogate mother was already bleeding back into reality.

"You need to get a grip, Zoe. It is your final year. We have two weeks of school to catch up on as soon as you're well."

They kissed her cheeks and left.

Zoe lay alone in the hospital bed, listening to the steady beep of the heart monitor.

Part 17: The Shift

The hospital was quiet, but Zoe's mind was deafening.

She stared at the dark ceiling, a single question burning in her chest: Am I going back to the way things were?

Was she going to let her mother's pressure dictate her life?

Was she going to be the sheep that blindly followed the herd, the NPC of her own story?

She remembered the heavy stones thrown by the village when she tried to show her intelligence.

She remembered Marc's cold, transactional sneer in the hostel. She remembered the Companion's voice telling her that an education was worthless if it didn't teach you how to think.

She spent the night awake, formulating her battle plan.

The next morning, the winter sun was streaming through the blinds when her parents arrived.

The doctor had given the green light. Her mother was already bustling around the room, aggressively packing Zoe's clothes into a duffel bag.

"We'll get you home, get a good meal in you, and I've already looked into extra tutoring courses," her mother chattered, zipping the bag shut.

"We can make up the lost time before the exams—"

Zoe froze. The pressure settled onto her shoulders, heavy and suffocating.

No, she thought. Speak.

"About that," Zoe said. Her voice wasn't loud, but it cut through the room like a knife.

"I am not going to be a doctor. And I am not going to be an engineer."

Her mother stopped dead. She turned slowly, her face flashing from confusion to anger.

"What? What do you mean? You've just woken up from a coma, don't start this now. What exactly are you going to do?"

Zoe pushed herself up against the pillows. She looked her parents dead in the eyes.

"Let me explain it like this," Zoe said, her voice eerily calm and grounded.

"You sort the trash at home, right? Paper, plastic, glass. You do it for recycling, to save the planet. But what if I told you all of it is basically useless? Just like our educational system?"

Her parents exchanged a bewildered look. "Zoe, what on earth—"

"The trash we sort is collected on the premise that it gets treated," Zoe continued, not letting them interrupt.

"Ten years ago, it was shipped off to China to be recycled. The ships would drop off new products and sail back filled with our garbage. But

China stopped taking it because the environmental and medical costs got too high. Now, every country is stuck with its own trash. Do you know how many recycling plants we actually have in the UK? Barely enough for one major city. So what are we doing? We're sorting our trash just to look good. It's vanity. We do it to feel like we are solving a problem we are actually ignoring."

She leaned forward. "There are only two ways to fix it. First, invent a cheaper way to recycle, because as long as making a new plastic bottle is cheaper than recycling an old one, no corporation will take the loss. Second, pass a law forcing them to recycle. But that means higher prices and lower corporate profits, and no politician is going to vote for that because they need the budget."

Her father stared at her, completely stunned.

"It is a broken loop," Zoe said, her voice hardening.

"Just like school. We stay in the system to get papers that have absolutely no value in real life. You study, you forget half of it after the exam, and the other half gets overwritten when a company trains you on the job anyway. Look at my generation. They need an influencer just to tell them what clothes to wear. They need an app to tell them how to think, and they can't even feel good about a thought until a thousand strangers validate it with a 'like'."

Zoe took a breath. Then she continued.

"And another thing. Everyone is afraid of AI. They think it will steal jobs, or lie to them, or turn into some kind of digital god. But AI is just a tool. Like a hammer. Like a calculator. Like the printing press. The problem is not the tool. The problem is what we feed it."

She looked at her father. Then her mother.

"AI learns from us. From our history. From our internet. From our broken arguments and our recycled lies. So if I ask an AI what I should do with my life, it will give me an answer based on a broken system. It will tell me to be a doctor. Or an engineer. Or to follow the herd. Because that is what the data says."

She leaned back against the pillows.

"I don't want an answer from a broken mirror. I want to learn how to ask better questions. That is the only way I will ever get a better answer."

Her mother opened her mouth to argue, but Zoe held up a hand.

"I don't know," Zoe said firmly.

"But what I do know is that I am not putting my future in the hands of some seventy-year-old politician still fighting the ghosts of the Cold War. I am not putting my future in the hands of corporations, and I am certainly not betting my life on the outdated statistics of a failing educational system. The first step is recognizing that the script is broken. From there… I take baby steps. One step at a time."

She reached out, grabbing both of her parents' hands. Her grip was startlingly strong.

"Trust me," Zoe said, her eyes shining with a fierce, ancient confidence.

"I will be okay. I have friends. I have Mary, Lucia, and Sam as a compass. I will handle it."

Her mother and father just stared at her. They hadn't grasped even half of it.

Her father quietly picked up the duffel bag, looking deeply unsettled, and ushered her mother out into the hallway to give Zoe a moment to change.

Through the cracked door, Zoe heard her father whisper. "Do you know Mary? And the others?"

"No clue," her mother whispered back, sounding entirely dismissive. "Maybe a classmate. Don't worry about it, she's just disoriented from the drugs. Give it a day. Tomorrow, she will be back to her old self, and she'll catch right up."

Sitting on the edge of the bed, Zoe heard it. She didn't scream. She didn't cry.

She just smiled a small, private smile.

Old habits die hard, she thought, slipping her feet into her shoes.

But I'm not stopping here.

She stood up and walked out into the busy hospital corridor.

Her parents were waiting by the elevators. As Zoe walked toward them, feeling the solid ground beneath her feet, a sharp, frantic male voice echoed from the nurse's station behind her.

"Lucy… Lucy!"

Zoe froze. Her breath caught in her throat. Her heart seized with a violent, agonizing cramp.

For a split second, the smell of antiseptic vanished, replaced by the freezing, salty air of a Frankish port.

She expected a heavy hand to grab her shoulder. She expected the iron poker.

She turned around, her muscles rigid.

A young male doctor brushed right past her, holding out a clipboard to a blonde nurse whose name tag read LUCY.

"Lucy, I need these charts updated," the doctor said, not even looking at Zoe.

Zoe let out a long, shaky exhale. She closed her eyes, forcing her heart rate to slow down.

She smiled, shaking her head at her own paranoia. It was going to be hard to adjust.

It was just a dream, she told herself, turning back toward her parents. It was just a dream.

She pushed the heavy glass doors open, stepping out into the bright, freezing reality of the real world.

…Was it?

Note to the Reader

I had a conversation with my seventeen-year-old son about his options for college.

The conversation itself is not important. But after we finished talking, I kept thinking. And thinking.

And eventually, this story came out.

The point is not the story, really. The point is that I realized something.

Maybe I need to stop being a father for once.

Maybe I need to stop giving advice, stop offering solutions, stop trying to protect him from bad choices.

Maybe I just need to listen.

And maybe — just maybe — he already has the answer.

Or he will find it. Or the answer does not exist yet, and he will have to build it himself.

This book is not a map. It is not a manual.

It is not a promise of a happily ever after.

It is an invitation.

The reader — you — must find your own answer.

And I hope it is better than anything I could have written.